



Review

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Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America by Larzer Ziff. New York: The Viking Press, 1981. Pp. xxv + 333. \$20.00.

Larzer Ziff's *Literary Democracy* does not break into our understanding of the Jacksonian period in American literature with any fresh news. The specialist will turn through it quickly, admiring the skill of its summarizing, the deftness of its paraphrase, and leave the book with his judgment of the great Jacksonian writers unaltered. This particular *mythos*, the Coming of Age, the Declaration of Cultural Independence, the Flowering, the Rebirth, has been told before. In his preface Ziff warily poses his precursors, Van Wyck Brooks and F. O. Matthiessen, and suggests that his approach will span the divergence of their historical writing. Brooks, it will be remembered, was essentially a social historian, Matthiessen an aesthete. Here, then, is Ziff, with Society (historical remarking) and Literature (interpretation), these two boulders. For the historian who does not have a political thesis driving his analysis, the project of fitting these two boulders together is very hard—and it is even harder to keep them moving in a synchronized motion. That has always been a problem in the writing of literary history, and Brooks and Matthiessen can indeed be seen to represent different resolutions. Ziff, however, does not resolve this problem; he simply moves back and forth. Two chapters are assigned to each major figure. Ziff will typically establish a socio-political framework in the first chapter, and then do a close reading of the respective texts in the second. Because neither the historical information nor the literary interpretation is surprising, a challenge to received opinion, one begins at length to consider the questions Ziff did not ask in *Literary Democracy*, to question his methodology.

What, after all, does "cultural independence" mean? We need somehow to know that before we entertain the question of how it happened between 1837 and 1861 in American literature. Those detailed and comprehensive histories of the concept, Perry Miller's *The Raven and The Whale* and Benjamin Spencer's *The Quest for Nationality*, demonstrate conclusively that it was a hot topic in the Jacksonian period, but how seriously, apart from its presence in contemporary rhetoric, its legendary existence, are we to take it? Whitman begins with the topic in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, declaring the independence of American poetry in the preface, but then he finishes the declaration and settles down to his real subject, *myself*. There is ironic reference to it in *Walden*. Melville plays with the idea in *Moby Dick*, and savages it in *Pierre*. It is a trope in the literature, the American Idea, the American Scholar, an American Art, but what practically is its stature? "Literary democracy grew from the new nationalism," Ziff tells us, and then must explain the alienation of the major Jacksonian writers from that nationalism. It could just as easily be argued that the concept (or trope) is anterior, peripheral, and that the importance of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville and Whitman lies in their ability to transcend the simpleminded nationalism of their period and become, one by one, cosmopolitan, trans-cultural writers. Melville's struggle in *Moby Dick* is with Shakespeare, not Jefferson. The causative line in Ziff's thinking often falls, one-two-three, too readily into place. "One is led to the hypothesis," he writes, "that not only did America need to come into possession of a positive nationalism before a native literature

could flourish, but that it had to dispossess certain groups in the process so as to free (if not compel) their children to respond with the weapons of thought."

These are the securities of the literary historian who writes after Taine and before Foucault. Do not look for an inspection of motive, moral, or plot in this text. What are the politics of Ziff's *Literary Democracy*? To which interpretation of the period does it belong? Ideologically, this study is written midstream in the post-Parringtonian mainstream. Those "native" writers who came into the possession of a "positive" nationalism are herein studied. Ziff's justification for his exclusions is peremptory. Irving, Cooper and Bryant are "conservatives" who "trim their work to foreign dimensions." We are, as we read *Literary Democracy*, in the surehanded grip of a positivist. This is a literary history that ends happily. In this regard, *Literary Democracy* is an enjoyable book. There are fine moments when a donnish aperçu will be well-turned. Ziff's appreciation of Emerson's critique of the solid English self, for example, is keenly rendered. Everything is familiar in this history, even the selection of the tributary texts: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, *The Monks of Monk Hall*, which are roundly reasoned forth. This is a sensible reading of Hawthorne, the judgment of Margaret Fuller is fair, and ditto the piece on Poe. Ziff's "phonemic" analysis of "Song of Myself" will strike some as rather labored, but his overall sense of Whitman is sound. So, with anecdote, with aperçu, he summarizes the relation of Jacksonian literature to Jacksonian society, shows these particular writers struggling with and expressing certain salient democratic ideas and myths, and the summary is comfortably stated within a finished interpretation. What are the politics of *Literary Democracy*? The composition of this study, with its major and minor figures, resembles the composition of the present Supreme Court.

The problem finally with *Literary Democracy* is that it isn't very democratic. Ziff rereads the canon, minus the conservatives, sans Cooper, and betrays really a parochial and/or elitist conception of what is in a democratic literature: essays, meditations, poetry, fiction. Could not one consider those jewels of Jacksonian oratory, the Webster-Hayne debate, the Lincoln-Douglas debate, eminent examples of a democratic literary art, high symbolic drama? And why is it that all such liberally inclined literary histories continue to ignore the relevance of *The Book of Mormon*? Here, take it any way you like, is the most significant of the homespun masterpieces in the Jacksonian period, a sacred text "written" by the commonest of all the Jacksonian writers, a preliterate, out-of-work scriber, one of the roughs. Joseph Smith would not only invent a fabulous prehistory for the New World, he would go on to reconstitute, in his own terms, for his own church, the Declaration of Independence and the Federal Constitution. Ziff does not explore the range of Jacksonian writing that lies outside the described field of the American Renaissance. Still, it is pleasurable to take again that walk around Brooklyn with Whitman and Thoreau, to think of Thoreau as a porcupine, to go out tramping with Emerson and Carlyle. Ziff astutely renders these scenes, explains the significance of the event, and at this level, as informed professorial narrative, *Literary Democracy* is absorbing.

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